

THE POWER OF FELLOWSHIP

Part 6 - Wrestling & Resting Together

ROMANS 15:28-33 (ESV)



Pastor Russ Ramsey
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Oak Hills Presbyterian Church,
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(The title and Scripture text for this sermon were inspired by a sermon John Piper preached on Sept 17, 2006 at Bethlehem Baptist in Minneapolis, MN.)

BOOKENDS

We finish this series on the power of fellowship taking about wrestling and resting together as a community. When you think of the book of Romans, how would you describe it? It is perhaps the densest doctrinal epistle in the Bible. Touching on the universal sinfulness of mankind, our justification in Christ alone for both Jew and Gentile, and the call to holy living—Romans is rich and bottomless.

Add to this that the letter was written to a church Paul had yet to actually visit, and it may surprise you to know that this letter begins and ends with some of Paul's most affectionate words. In Romans I, he talks about how much he longs for a relationship with these people, how he prays for them and wants them to be able to encourage each other with their gifts and faith. He tells them he'd love to be used by God to see a Gospel harvest among them. ^(Rom 1:9-15) In today's text near the end of Romans, he returns to this theme: God means for His people to be people we can wrestle with and also be refreshed among.

To work through this text today, I am going to share some of my personal story of times I have been blessed in both my wrestling and resting here at Oak Hills. My intent is not to bring glory to myself, as most of what I say will illustrate. Rather, I want to use my own experiences as a case study and teaching tool. For every anecdote I share, I trust you have parallels. I pray through telling my stories of wrestling and resting in the fellowship here that the Lord would call to mind our stories of wrestling and resting together, and refresh us through it.

ROMANS 15:28-33

²⁸When therefore I have completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you. ²⁹I know that when I come to you I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.

³⁰I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf, ³¹that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, ³²so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company. ³³May the God of peace be with you all. Amen.

WRESTLING WELL

Jerusalem was under famine, and Paul was on his way there with relief he had gathered from the churches he'd visited in Asia Minor. After that, his plan was to sail to Spain visiting the church in Rome on the way. Though he didn't know many of the believers there, he knew being with them would encourage him both in his striving for the Gospel and in his refreshment. In fellowship we have an incredible capacity to do both.

When I first started preaching at Oak Hills, several of you were here then for some of my first sermons. I love to preach and I love laboring to get better at what I do. I have said before that I want, by God's grace, to become a great preacher because, well, what preacher would hope to one day become a mediocre preacher. I believe God has called me to this craft. I love it. But in those early days, I was pretty lost in the woods. I was hard to follow. I used illustrations and sometimes even I didn't get their connection. Trying to end a sermon was like circling the runway, unsure how to land. It could take a while.

Though I am by no means a great preacher now, that was a season of wrestling for me and my family—good wrestling, but still, it was a struggle. We had recently relocated to this city where we knew no one. I was here to assist Scott, and that dear friend of mine took a call to another church only six months into my tenure. That year was a little like the book of Romans for my family—warm in its greeting, encouraging at the end, and filled with lots of heavy doctrinal study in the middle. I was pursuing ordination at the time and had to give a great deal of my mental energy to memorizing dates, references, doctrines and Presbyterian procedures. It was a unique season of struggle.

You all, Oak Hills, were awesome in wrestling with us. It was a season of powerful fellowship—a great picture of what I believe Paul meant when he asked the Romans to strive with him. You would come up to me and affirm I was called to proclaim the Gospel. You'd say things like "We know you are a young pastor, but we're a young church and we're willing to grow with you." Some of you would even gather the nerve to critique my preaching.

We weren't striving for nothing in those days. We were headed somewhere. We believed God was building His church. We believed He meant to do great things through Oak Hills. To those of you who have a history here, do you remember those days? Do you remember believing that? Let me ask us all a more pointed question. Do we believe the Lord means to use this church for great things even now? Do we believe Oak Hills exists to know and make known the astonishing grace of God? Are you, right now, astonished by it? Am I?

Beloved, I can tell you with authority that our Lord Jesus Christ still means to use this church for glorious things. How do I know? Because Christ's eternal purposes for this church do not spring from what the personalities, talents and bank accounts of Oak Hills have to offer. His mission for this church flows from His own passion for His glory which is the mission of the Church Universal to which Oak Hills belongs. The head of this church and the Author of Her mission is Christ. We "are a people for His own possession, that [we] may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called [us] out of darkness and into His marvelous light." ^(1 Pet 2:9) And we do this together as a fellowship.

Have we stopped striving for this, Oak Hills? This series on the power of fellowship is about so much more than spending six weeks cheering for getting along with each other. Our mission as the people of God has the glorious purpose of lifting High the greatness of our Lord, and this is not the work of just one person. This is the chorus of the saints, the great cloud of witnesses—and it is powerful! Paul understands this.

He has not yet been to Rome, but he counts the Roman Christians every bit as co-laborers with him because they and he both belong to Christ. When Paul talks of striving with the Romans, it was for the advancement of the Gospel. God was on the move and He was using His people to proclaim Christ. Often this meant perilous risks for confessing Christians. But look at what Paul wanted the Romans to strive with him for in prayer: that he would be unhindered and effective in ministry. This is what it means to wrestle well—to strive for the advancement of the Gospel, to contend for something greater than our personal interests, to seek the face of God.

HONESTY IN BROKENNESS

Just because we're wrestling, that doesn't mean we're wrestling for things we should strive for. We can also wrestle in futility. Paul gives this counsel: "*Do not run aimlessly; do not box as one beating the air.*" (1 Cor 9:26) Back in my early days here, I hadn't had the experience of finding my voice as a preacher. I didn't know who I was. It was all very new. I remember a few of you saying, "*Listen, just be yourself.*" Let me first say I appreciate the spirit behind that encouragement. People wanted me to relax and not try to fit into some mold. I get that. I did need to relax.

But that counsel always troubled me—and it still does a bit. Let me tell you why. What if I took that advice to heart—I mean **really** took it to heart? Do you know who I was then? I was an inexperienced preacher, theologian, counselor, administrator, small group leader and project coordinator. I was also a scared, selfish man who still thought of myself as a kid, and who still expected the people around me to pick up on my moods and react accordingly. Should I have tried to be myself in *this* sense?

What would that sort of striving look like? I'd strive to convince people they need to view my weaknesses as what they should expect. I'd strive to escape criticism through defensiveness. I'd strive to nurture a culture where we never expect much of each other besides what interests us. And it would be striving toward futility. Just being myself is the last thing Oak Hills needs from me. Here in my eighth year here, I am further down the road, but nowhere near the end. I'm still just getting started. We're not called to remain as we are. We're called to be like Christ. Peter writes, "*Do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct.*" (1 Pet 1:14-15) Knowing I cannot conjure up my own holiness, still, I should want to strive to grow in my own personal piety. We should want this from each other.

I've said this before and will say it again: we can make an idol out of our brokenness. First, what is an idol? It is a false god—something we look to to make sense of the world and our reason for living in it. Tim Keller says we often make idols out of good and true things. We do this, he says, by taking a good thing and making it the ultimate thing. Money is a great example. It is good to earn and use money, but if money becomes the ultimate thing in our lives, we have given it the power and authority to declare what we are worth—a role belonging to God alone. The same with can be done with relationships, politics, and talents. And we can do this with our brokenness.

We can employ our brokenness to excuse us from things we should have a conscience about before the Lord. I can be lazy in my job and say, "*Well, that's just me. I'm undisciplined. It's part of being a sinner.*" I can hear my wife asking for my affection and withhold it, thinking she needs to accept this as a part of the messiness of being married to a broken man like me. I can be chronically callous around people I regard as somehow beneath me (though I would never say it that way), and chalk it up to being unable to be around someone that different, as though this was just a point of fact. I can look at others and surmise by how they carry themselves that they do not see themselves to be as broken as I see myself and I can label them shallow or worse, less spiritual without ever bothering to know them.

This is how we make brokenness an idol—we deflect and point people to the messed up part of ourselves as though it is the most important thing you could know about us. We point to our brokenness as the reason why we are not the friends, children, spouses, employees and disciples we're called to be. And of course this is true, but if our objective in appealing to our brokenness is to get people off our case so they won't expect much from us, we have made an idol of our brokenness and what it is costing us is honest fellowship as we build walls.

Please don't hear me saying you should downplay your own brokenness. If you are a Christian, you **MUST** embrace your own brokenness. A huge and true part of your testimony is that you are, in fact, more sinful and broken than even you can comprehend about yourself. We recognize this is the case for everyone else too—and admit and even accept that this makes relationships messy. I am not contesting any of that. But if as Christians we regard our brokenness as the ultimate thing another person can know about us, we have come close to the peak of the truth about ourselves, but not far enough.

EQUIPPED TO REFRESH

The most important thing anyone can know about a Christian is that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us (Rom 5:8) and in Christ, we are at peace with God—a truth anchored in our pasts, present and futures. In the past, "*He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him.*" (Eph 1:4) In the present, "*He has now reconciled in His body of flesh by His death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before Him*" (Col 1:22) Concerning the future, "*May the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.*" (1 Thes 5:23)

Why does this matter in a message about wrestling and resting? Because in fellowship we'll end up doing a lot of both together. I believe we can get our minds around how we help each other wrestle, but I also want us to see also how we can help each other rest. Paul says he expects to arrive "*in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.*" (15:29) He also says coming to them will be a joy and he'll "*be refreshed in their company.*" (15:32) Because of what Christ has done, believers have an incredible capacity to fill each other up emotionally, spiritually, socially and every other way.

I have known many times the joy of being refreshed in your company. And so often it has seemed to have little to do with Christian activity—softball, breakfasts, back-packing. But I tell you, it has everything to do with Christ. In His redeeming you, He has equipped you to refresh me. We're going to wrestle through a lot together, but let us not forget the call to refresh one another or doubt God has equipped us for this in Christ. We do this in our relationships. This is the power of fellowship.